Third world media: introduction

by Chuck Kleinhans

From JUMP CUT's inception, we have discussed Third World film as an essential part of understanding the global reality of media. Set against the historical development of international capitalism and contemporary imperialism, Third World media work provides many examples of strategies of resistance and revolution. In this way it is illuminating for all types of radical media work. In presenting another group of articles on Third World media we are reaffirming a commitment and also indicating some important issues which we think need to be understood and addressed by everyone concerned with the politics and process of anti-imperialist cultural work.

Here, in the concluding section of his book, *The Viewer's Dialectic* (parts one and two ran in JUMP CUT nos. 29 and 30), Cuban director Tomás Gutierrez Alea discusses his best-known film, *Memories of Underdevelopment*, in terms of both its Cuban context and its reception abroad, particularly in the U.S. In the process he demonstrates how healthy media criticism needs to be contextual. Understanding Third World media cannot rest on simply our cheerleading all productions, nor can it depend on selecting out "masterpieces" for enlightened consumption in the capitalist core countries. Without political understanding and sensitivity to the actual context of particular works, we'll have little room for advancing our understanding of the Third World and its cultural production. Working from a cross cultural political understanding, with a sensitivity about how to do the necessary task of translation, challenges the European and North American bias that so often frames the process whereby "other" cultures get diffused in the cultures of the capitalist nations.

Given the uneven development of Third World media analysis, Manthia Diawara's article on the early historical development of filmmaking in sub-Saharan Africa provides an excellent example of how original research can give us a better understanding of subsequent developments. By showing the mixed and changing relations between colonial and African film production in the past, he provides an essential corrective to simple views that African filmmaking emerged spontaneously and autonomously.

Another challenging view of Third World film emerges in Zuzana Pick's analysis of

Chilean film in exile. Pick discusses a national cinema that has not only survived international dispersion but in many cases prospered intellectually and artistically, if not always economically. We can see that Pinochet's aggressive fascism has not succeeded in halting progressive media production by Chileans, but that the exiles, despite immense personal hardship, have produced a newer and stronger cultural resistance. The quantity and quality of this work stands as a permanent witness to the ingenuity and political persistence of its makers.

We conclude the section on Third World media with John Hess' report on the 1986 Havana festival. We will be running further discussions of Third World media in the next issue of JUMP CUT, including further discussions by Diawara and Pick of African and Chilean cinema. We have several new views of Chinese film also lined up as well as extensions of our long-standing interest in Latin American media, such as a translation of Edmundo Desnoes' classic essay, "The Photographic Image of Underdevelopment." In this way we see JUMP CUT's commitment to reporting on and analyzing Third World media as part of a dialectical process which must proceed not by finding definitive answers and categorical truths, but by admitting its ongoing nature and being open to revision and fuller elaboration.

NEW FORMS FOR DIALOGUE

North American and European understanding of Third World film has progressed considerably in the past few years. About twenty years ago, "Third World cinema" meant a few works by Satyajit Ray, Buñuel's Mexican films and Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*. Today Brazilian and Argentine films play in the art house circuit, a fairly wide range of documentaries is available for film club and classroom use, and some festivals have begun regularly slotting African and Asian cinema. Also, critical discussion has been increasingly better informed. More publications have begun to pay attention to Third World film, and new books, such as Françoise Pfaff's *The Cinema of Ousemane Sembene* and Julianne Burton's *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers*, provide much needed background and contextual analysis for furthering our comprehension.

Generating a new climate for the reception of Third World film is exciting and problematic at the same time. It's exciting because we have begun to see a truly transnational and multi-continental circulation of films and tapes, and filmmakers and tapemakers, which allows for a much fuller and richer cross-cultural development of theory and practice. But it is problematic because, in many cases, we have still not developed meaningful and effective ways of carrying on cross-cultural communication. A case in point is the 1986 Edinburgh Film Festival's Third Cinema conference, a three-day event which brought together British, U.S., African, Caribbean, and Asian film people in a context of shared concerns. [The Thatcher government refused visas to invited Cubans, thus eliminating Latin American representation.]

Reviewing the event in the British film journal *Framework*, David Will noted,

> "Too much was crammed into into too little time ... with the result that some speakers had little real chance to develop their positions and the

audience was sometimes not given enough opportunity to contribute to discussions. The atmosphere was extremely heated at times and, particularly for the first two days, was charged with *frisson,* conflict and tension. At times, the whole event seemed close to lapsing into disarray."

While the outrageous macho posturing of some participants contributed to a rotten atmosphere, most of the blame must rest with the conference organizers, Jim Pines and Paul Willemen. They arranged the event to stress hot conflict instead of reasonable discussion. The agenda emphasized abstract issues rather than specific examples. In many cases, the program established no initial common ground for discussion to elaborate on, with the predictable result that personal and organizational egotism erupted again and again.

While almost the whole audience in attendance could be described as progressive political people, the conference did not seek to bring people together on a political basis. Since the conference had articulated no common goal or concern to guide the event, slogans and abstractions substituted for thoughtful discussion. Certainly the process of bringing together about a hundred people with divergent views is not easy. But practical experience and common sense can go a long way to providing the fundamentals for productive interaction.

Background information papers can provide essential knowledge for a multinational gathering to grasp where others are coming from. Small group discussion, formal or informal, can make everyone feel they are participating. Film and video makers need to have their work shown before they speak, or to have excerpts shown to accompany their remarks so the audience can see where the speaker is coming from. The problems with not doing this show up in Will's own report. He assumes that Haile Gerima is a populist and vulgar realist on the basis of the Ethiopian filmmaker's remarks, a characterization which would collapse if Gerima's *Ashes and Embers* had been exhibited at Edinburgh.

We can talk to each other cross-culturally if we talk about specifics, about films we've just seen together. But to talk abstractly about Third World cinema means that history, national context, actual conditions of production and diffusion, local political situations, and primary audience are all swept off the table so that hearty fist pounding on the table can take place. Instead, we need forms of exchange which are fundamentally respectful, which recognize that we all have different paths in arriving at the concern for developing a politically powerful Third World cinema and video.

Some people learn media skills first, some people learn politics first. Some people learn theory first, some people develop practice first. Those who are vitally concerned with Third World cinema include academics and filmmakers, exhibitors and teachers, distributors and critics, journalists and people who work in culture institutions. Some work within a government apparatus, some have been driven into exile by their government. Some live in the Third World, some live in the urban centers of imperialism. Some try to make feature-length dramatic narratives, some aim at short, agitational documentaries. Some define themselves as artists,

some as activists. Some have the power and privilege of academic appointments and/or white skin, some face ugly racism daily and live close to subsistence level. Understanding this diversity and taking it into account, we can come together and communicate and learn from each other.

But not understanding this, we get what occurred at Edinburgh. High-flown academic papers using the latest theoretical fashions and jargon were read at breakneck speed to an audience which had a substantial number of Third World participants who used English as a second, third, or fourth language. People stood up and vehemently denounced films which they had not even seen. Others with no practical experience of any kind felt no restraint in attacking people who drew conclusions based on years of experience. There was plenty of smoke, and lots of heat, but very little light.

To assume that a heated and divisive conference produces good results is arrogant on the part of the organizers. The international women's movement, particularly in the past few years, has shown that it is possible to have productive political cross-cultural dialogue. At the Nairobi conference and at some others, it has even been possible for women who are politically divided on a national level, such as Palestinians and Israelis, to come together and listen to each other's views and try to find common grounds for understanding.

Such unity is always difficult; it is sometimes impossible. But those genuinely committed to overthrowing imperialism must take the necessary steps to try to make it happen. Developing the politics and aesthetics of Third World cinema has become too important to be turned into another fashionable concern of film theorists who need something new to liven up their repertoire. It's too important to be discussed with swaggering male bravado as the privileged form of presentation. We need new forms for organizing conferences, for presenting our ideas, for communicating with each other. Certainly those involved have differences that need discussion, and political disagreements must be aired, but people must do so within an atmosphere of mutual respect.